

VZCZCXRO0694
OO RUEHFK RUEHKS RUEHNH
DE RUEHKO #7084/01 3550434
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 210434Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9277
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 5251
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 1937
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 8229
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 1343
RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA PRIORITY 9253
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA PRIORITY 1737
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE PRIORITY 2688
RUEHKS/AMCONSUL SAPPORO PRIORITY 0277
RHMFISS/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA PRIORITY
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/DISA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/TREASURY DEPT WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI PRIORITY 6261

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 007084

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [JA](#)
SUBJECT: ABE'S SHORT HONEYMOON

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE//PRIORITY//

Classified By: AMBASSADOR J. THOMAS SCHIEFFER. REASONS 1.4 (B),(D).

¶1. Summary (C) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's honeymoon with Japanese voters has come to a quick end. Abe's popularity in polls surged above 70 percent when he visited Beijing and Seoul to better relations with Japan's neighbors and the DPRK exploded a nuclear device. However, his popularity began to slide when he let it be known that he would allow LDP postal rebels expelled by former Prime Minister Koizumi to return to the ruling party. While we assess that Abe's recent troubles with the voters are not fatal, they bear watching, especially in the lead up to the Upper House elections next July. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Shinzo Abe assumed the prime ministership of Japan on September 26 after a ho-hum campaign in which he was the long-presumed winner. Immediate polling showed the Japanese public approved of his government by a wide margin (ranging from 63 percent to 71 percent approval, 14.2 percent to 18 percent disapproval across seven major newspapers and wire services). His ratings stayed near that range through October after Abe visited Beijing and Seoul to reengage their governments in an effort to better Sino-Japanese and Japanese-Korean relations. Abe's poll numbers began a long slide after he let it be known that he would allow the so-called postal rebels expelled by former Prime Minister Koizumi to return to the party. Recent polls show the approval rate for Abe's cabinet down in the 41.9 percent to 55.9 percent range in the same publications, with disapproval running in the 30 percent to 32 percent range. Interestingly enough, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) numbers remain essentially flat, holding in the 14 percent to 18 percent range over the same period.

¶3. (C) It is not unusual for Japanese Prime Ministers to lose their popularity; former Prime Minister Mori left office with a 6 percent approval rate. In the words of Secretary to former Prime Minister Koizumi, Isao Iijima, "a cabinet can survive with even a zero percent support rate, so Abe should not worry too much" about his declining numbers. Abe's

present numbers still qualify him as a popular Prime Minister by Japanese standards, but they are a warning sign of possible trouble that could increase pressure on him to perform well in the July 2007 Upper House elections, or else risk a challenge to his leadership.

14. (C) Abe's acceptance of the rebel's return to the LDP has put his reform credentials in doubt. The public does not appear to want the LDP to return to the "good old boy" party that it was before Koizumi's reforms. At the snap election in September 2005, the LDP got huge majorities among so-called "floating voters" who went with Koizumi on the promise that he would be an agent for reform. Initially these voters appeared to embrace Abe, but some may have changed their minds. In one poll, 66 percent of voters in the Tokyo metropolitan and Kansai regions that served as the driving force for the LDP's overwhelming victory in 2005 opposed readmitting the postal rebels, with only 19 percent in favor.

15. (C) Falling poll numbers have also caused renewed criticism of Abe's Cabinet personnel choices. We hear from multiple sources that in-fighting among the five personal advisors to Abe and the Ministers whose portfolios they cover is still prevalent. After three months in office, it is still unclear exactly how the new system for bringing more direct decision-making into the Prime Minister's office will work. There are rumblings that Abe must show more leadership and decisiveness if he is to have long-term success.

16. (C) Another problem, which actually predates the fuss over the postal rebels and is inherited from former Prime Minister Koizumi, is the disconnect between Abe's legislative

TOKYO 00007084 002 OF 002

program and the most pressing concerns of Japan's voters. Abe has delivered on promises to amend Japan's 1947 Law on Education, revise the Constitution, upgrade the Japan Defense Agency to ministry status, and work toward delegating greater authority to the prefectures, among many other legislative successes in the just-concluded Diet session (septel). Polling, however, continues to show that voters are far more interested in pension reform and economic issues.

17. (C) Asked to rank what is most important to them, Japanese voters overwhelmingly choose pension reform. According to some polls, over 40 percent list it as the most important issue facing the government. Over 20 percent single out fiscal reconstruction and economic recovery as pressing issues. Only six percent of Japanese identify educational reform and constitutional revision, Abe's signature issues, as matters important to them. Although Abe made considerable strides toward fulfilling many of his campaign pledges in the extraordinary Diet session that ended on December 19, the media and political elites give him little credit and the public seems largely indifferent.

18. (C) Comment: While Abe's ship has undoubtedly taken on water in the past few weeks, we do not feel it is near sinking. This slip in public popularity may, however, cause Abe to be even more cautious in dealing with issues that could have a negative impact. It will also likely cause him to emphasize the abduction issue in his foreign policy pronouncements, since that issue has been the source of much of his popularity with the public in the past. We also believe that his drop in popularity has increased the pressure on Abe to do well in the Upper House elections next July. Should the party stumble badly then, Abe will likely face a strong challenge to his leadership.

SCHIEFFER